

Civil War Book Review

Summer 2021

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Editorial

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In response to the voluminous historical literature published around the Civil War sesquicentennial, a professor of mine jokingly suggested a moratorium on books about the War of Rebellion. The scholarship reviewed in this issue makes me happy he did not get his way. Each of the featured books can be considered microhistories, as their subjects range in scope from institutional studies of army-wide special units, community studies of regiments, and biographies of important leaders and men representative of their time. With these microhistories, the authors featured in this slim issue demonstrate the vibrancy and dynamism of Civil War military history.

Two books reviewed in this issue focus their attention on special units in the Confederate and Union armies. Guy R. Hasegawa's *Matchless Organization: The Confederate Army Medical Department*, chronicles Dr. Samuel Moore's often fruitless efforts to rationalize and systematize the Confederate Army's medical department. Hasegawa shows that phenomena endemic to the Confederacy's government and culture—namely material want and overwrought independence—hampered Moore's attempts to systematize and rationalize the Confederate Army's medical department. Reviewer Dale C. Smith believes “anyone with a serious interest in the War of the Rebellion medicine should read it.”

Robert W. Black's *Yank and Rebel Rangers: Special Operatives in the American Civil War* shows how both belligerents used “small forces of fearless, highly motivated soldiers for special operations behind enemy lines.” Reviewer Meg Groeling writes that Black approaches his subjects “clearly and without prejudice” in chapters dedicated to specific operatives in both armies. Black's examination of Union Army ranger C. Lorain Ruggles and President Lincoln's antebellum service in Captain Elijah Isle's company of Independent Rangers in the Black Hawk War are of special interest. In the end, Groeling recommends Black's *Yank and Rebel Rangers* “to anyone interested in partisan warfare in general and Civil War partisans specifically.”

Reviewer Ryan W. Keating touts Diana Dretske's *The Bonds of War: A Story of Immigrants and Esprit De Corps in Company C, 9th Illinois Volunteer Infantry* as microhistory *par excellence*. This study of five friends and neighbors who fought alongside one another in the 96th Illinois after having migrated to the United States illuminates "the importance of local community and the ways in which those at home and in arms were bound through the common connection of the war and military service." While it might be tempting to assume the volunteers' ethnicity was the driving force behind their collective enlistment, Dretske explains that the regiment itself did not possess an ethnic "regimental identity," and her subjects were motivated to join the war by local concerns in their adoptive community. "*The Bonds of War* is an ambitious and well executed book that" serves as a Civil War microhistory template for other historians to follow, Keating concludes.

The remaining books reviewed in this issue are biographies, but more to the point, they are studies in leadership and command. Household names like generals Ulysses S. Grant and George Meade, are given fresh analysis. Reviewer Charles R. Bowery writes that David A. Powell's *The Impulse of Victory: Ulysses S. Grant at Chattanooga* combines "personality-centric analysis" with a "solid understanding of the tactical and operational events" surrounding the fight for Chattanooga. The result is an effective understanding of the campaign as well as its "strategic and political context." Grant's success derived in large part from his "emotional intelligence and military skill" which allowed him to quickly confront challenging situations. Bowery ends by stating that "*The Impulse of Victory* should be required reading for anyone interested in Ulysses S. Grant, the Civil War in the West, or Civil War generalship."

Though Meade's name may ring familiar to most Civil War history enthusiasts, his performance at Gettysburg has been reduced "to near-cipher status" in the robust literature on the battle, writes reviewer Christopher S. Stowe. With Kent Masterson Brown's *Meade at Gettysburg: A Study in Command* "a noticeable void has been filled," Stowe writes. In this "outstanding campaign history," Brown challenges the established portrayal of Meade when he argues that the general was "an effective operational commander and a relentless tactical commander who [was] fully aware of the strength and capability of his enemy." Brown's *Meade at Gettysburg* will find its place "among the Pennsylvania campaign's prominent and preferred volumes," Stowe predicts.

More marginal figures, like U.S. generals David McMurtrie Gregg and John Ellis Wool, and Confederate general Robert E. Rodes are centered in biographies reviewed in this issue. Edward G. Longacre neatly sums up his argument in *Unsung Hero of Gettysburg: The Story of Union General David McMurtrie Gregg* when he writes that the general “embodied the 19th-Century cavalry commander.” Reviewer David J. Eicher writes that Longacre presents a “fine narrative,” in which the author weaves stories of the general’s personal life together with battle scenes that “are interesting and move along at a fast pace.” Longacre “clearly admires his subject,” Eicher writes, but the work “is not without offering criticism.” With *Unsung Hero of Gettysburg*, the general “has finally received a biography that delivers the details of a soldier’s full and interesting life,” over a century after Gregg’s death.

General John Ellis Wool’s military career spanned half a century, yet he has been overshadowed by his contemporary General Winfield Scott in military history. Reviewer Wayne Wei-siang Hsieh writes that Harwood P. Hinton’s and Jerry Thompson’s *Courage Above All Things: General John Ellis Wool and the U.S. Military, 1812-1863* “embraces multiple strands in the larger literature on the Old Army,” because the general’s career spanned such a long chronology in which important developments in the U.S. Army’s professionalization were made. While “Wool was his own man with his own peculiarities,” Hsieh writes, his personality and professional behavior “reflected the Old Army’s larger institutional culture.” Hinton’s and Thompson’s “handsome” and “ably illustrated book,” Hsieh writes, is “the definitive biography of a general officer whose career deserves more scholarly attention.”

Reviewer David A. Welker believes Robert J. Wynstra’s *No Place for Glory: Major General Robert E. Rodes and the Confederate Defeat at Gettysburg* “shines a long overdue light on” Rodes’s failure at Gettysburg and his omission from the literature about the battle. In “an engaging, readable narrative,” Wynstra shows that “leadership breakdowns” in Rodes’s command “ultimately undid the fighting determination and sacrifice of” Confederate soldiers, which led “to the South’s Gettysburg defeat as surely as did the actions of more popularly famous officers and units.” *No Place for Glory* “will find a well-deserved place in the Gettysburg shelf of every interested reader’s” collection, Welker writes.

While most of the figures featured in the studies mentioned above likely considered themselves gentlemen, the subject of Robert E. Cray’s *A Notable Bully: Colonel Billy Wilson, Masculinity, and the Pursuit of Violence in the Civil War Era* was a nineteenth-century “rough”

whose story helps us better understand the relationship between nineteenth-century masculinity and violence. *A Notable Bully* shows that violence went out of and in fashion in the antebellum era, a trend that helped the “notable bully” Wilson to “assert his manhood, build his reputation, assert leadership, and win or lose political battles.” With his “flair for storytelling,” Cray gives vibrancy to “scholarly conclusions of gender historians regarding the role of violence in nineteenth-century manhood,” Reviewer Lorien L. Foote writes. Foote agrees with Cray’s contention that Wilson’s story is one “worth knowing,” and she contends herself that “the story as Cray tells it, is worth reading.”

Meg Groeling, pulling double duty in this issue, writes that Stark Young’s 1934 novel, *So Red the Rose*, is worth reading too. Americans apparently agreed as Young’s book was the second best-selling novel in America until Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* blew it from its perch. The book was published as part of the Southern Classic Series which was an attempt to “create a southern literary tradition” in the interwar period. Groeling, writes that, while that endeavor ultimately failed, “good books resulted.” Among them is *So Red the Rose*, which relates the Civil War-era sagas of two prominent fictive Mississippi families, both of which are “large, patriarchal, and structured to preserve the fiction of social and racial supremacy.” Historical figures—Grant, Sherman, and the family’s neighbor, Jefferson Davis—appear in the narrative as the families debate secession, sons fight and die for the Confederate cause, daughters fall in and out of love, husbands turn to drink, and their wives support them (while gaining a sense of superiority).

Finally, in this issue’s installment of “Civil War Treasures,” Hans Rasmussen examines the contents of two manuscript collections in LSU’s Hill Memorial Library that chronicle the experiences of the besiegers and the besieged at Vicksburg. Aaron P. Record of Eden Township in Iowa mustered into the 8th Iowa Infantry Regiment on August 12, 1861. During his tour of duty, Record maintained a diary (MSS. 4869) in which he kept track of “the quick-moving action of the wider Vicksburg campaign” in Louisiana and Mississippi. He helped take Jackson and attacked Vicksburg in Grant’s abortive attempts to break into the fortified city. Grant and Private Record both arrived at the same conclusion after Confederate General Pemberton refused to capitulate in late-May: “it is useless to storm their works any more and I guess that they will siege [*sic*] them out.” Lieutenant Lewis Guion, who left his law practice to join Company D. of the 26th Louisiana Infantry, was on the inside of the Confederate fortifications around Vicksburg,

an experience which he documented in his own diary (MSS.826). The two men's diaries display "the familiar and repetitive acts of siege warfare for over a month," Rasmussen explains. Beyond that, Record's diary displays "an unyielding confidence in Union efforts," while Guion's reflects the people of Vicksburg's "vain if hopeful" attitude during Grant's attempt to take their town, a vain hope that diminished as news of Confederate general Joseph E. Johnston's actions (or lack thereof) in Mississippi reached Confederate ears from beyond the redans and trenches. Rasmussen writes that while "both diarists continued their entries for several more months, their complementary accounts of the siege of Vicksburg remain the most fruitful part of these invaluable resources for studying the campaign to capture the famous Confederate citadel on the Mississippi."

This issue of *The Civil War Book Review* is not the first one dedicated to traditional military histories of the Civil War, nor will it be the last. This is because, as these works demonstrate, there is ample room and need for more scholarship on the people who fought the war, and why and how they fought it. Until those topics are thoroughly exhausted, *The Civil War Book Review* will continue to broadcast to eager readers literature on the Civil War's military aspects.

Sincerely,
Jeffery Hardin Hobson
Editor, *The Civil War Book Review*